



Chinese immigration and the Transcontinental railroad

By the time the Civil War began, the westward expansion movement was in full swing. Although Americans had first started moving toward the Pacific more than a decade earlier, making the journey to the West was still no simple task. In order to reach California, settlers needed to either travel overland by wagon or board ships that sailed around the southern tip of South America before arriving on the West Coast of the United States. Both of these options were dangerous and time-consuming; in fact, a trip from the East Coast to California could take more than a year to complete. Railroads were well-established in the eastern part of the country by the mid-nineteenth century, but had not yet become an option for reaching its western states and territories. Settlers and businessmen alike wanted the railroad to come to the West so that people and goods could more easily make their way there. In 1862, Congress passed a bill authorizing the creation of a transcontinental railroad that would connect the West with the rest of the nation. This project involved two companies, Union Pacific and Central Pacific, and would take six years to complete. Although most of the companies' railroad workers were initially from Ireland and Union Pacific employed some native-born American soldiers, the vast majority of workers for Central Pacific were Chinese immigrants by the time the railroad was finished. These immigrants faced particularly poor working conditions and fierce discrimination, but their efforts were crucial to the construction of the railroad and to the full development of the West.

The Chinese had already established a significant presence in the United States before the call for a transcontinental railroad came about. More than 40,000 Chinese immigrants arrived in California during the 1850s. Most came from southern China and hoped to escape the poverty and social unrest that characterized their homeland. Like thousands of native-born Americans and immigrants from other parts of the world, they hoped to strike it rich during the Gold Rush. When they failed to achieve this dream and the scramble for gold had ended, many of these Chinese immigrants remained in California to perform other jobs. Some worked in the silver mines, while others worked as cooks and domestic servants in such cities as San Francisco. When work on the Transcontinental Railroad began, neither Union Pacific nor Central Pacific wanted to hire these immigrants. This was due to the general prejudices of the time. By the mid 1860s, however, the leaders of Central Pacific had realized that it was difficult to recruit railroad workers and keep them on the job. Central Pacific's part of the project included the Sierra Nevada mountains, which rose to elevations of over 14,000 feet and were very treacherous. The company needed thousands of laborers and had only been able to find hundreds. In addition, the Irish workers it had managed to hire were requesting higher wages. Since Central Pacific's portion of the railroad began in Sacramento, California and there was already a relatively large Chinese population in the northern part of the state, the company decided to begin recruiting Chinese laborers. These workers were willing to lay tracks in dangerous areas for extremely low pay and were also viewed as peaceful and submissive. They proved themselves to be efficient laborers, and the generally balanced diets they followed made them healthier than their Irish coworkers. By the time the Union Pacific and Central Pacific railroads met in Utah in 1869, Central Pacific had recruited thousands of additional workers directly from China. When the Transcontinental Railroad was complete, Chinese laborers made up over 90 percent of Central Pacific's workforce.

Although working on the railroad was a risky job for all laborers, Chinese workers faced more challenges than their white counterparts did. The Chinese were subject to suspicion and racial slurs from other workers. They were also subject to certain company policies that their non-Chinese colleagues did not have to face. For example, Central Pacific offered higher pay to its white workers and provided them with meals and shelter; meanwhile, Chinese laborers received lower wages and were expected to find their own food and tents. Chinese workers often had to live in the underground tunnels they were constructing, and more than one thousand died in accidents and avalanches while laboring in the mountains.

Without the work of these immigrants, the Transcontinental Railroad might have never been built. In turn, the West would have remained difficult to settle and might not have become as developed and populated as it is today. Despite their hard work, the Chinese experienced discrimination for generations after the completion of the railroad. California laws prevented them from being admitted as witnesses in court, voting, and becoming naturalized citizens. Chinese schoolchildren were also subject to segregation. In 1882, the federal government passed the Chinese Exclusion Act, which banned new Chinese workers from entering the United States and prevented Chinese immigrants who were already in the U.S. from becoming citizens. This law remained in effect until 1943.

For more information about early Chinese immigrants and their role in building the Transcontinental Railroad, refer to the following links.

- [Chinese Immigrants and the Building of the Transcontinental Railroad](#)
- [The Chinese in California: Timeline](#)
- [Workers of the Central Pacific Railroad](#)
- [Chinese Laborers in the West](#)
- [Immigration, Railroads, and the West](#)